

ATHENA PERSPECTIVES

Fresh and Deep Dimension to the News

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IN THIS EDITION...

1. Insights for the Week

1.1 West African Solidarity at a Crossroads: Rethinking the purpose and mandate of ECOWAS

— page 2

2. Issues in the News:

Top four stories on our thematic areas in Nigeria

— page 5

3. Regional Updates

Top stories from Benin, Cameroon, Chad, and Niger (BCCN)

— page 6



1.1 West African Solidarity at a Crossroads: Rethinking the purpose and mandate of ECOWAS

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) was established in 1975 as a platform for economic integration, collective security, and political cooperation in West Africa. Since its formation, it has navigated numerous challenges, including political instability, economic disparities, and security threats.

However, recent developments which has led to the withdrawal of Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso has exposed cracks in its framework, prompting a re-evaluation of its mandate, structure, and relevance. Recent developments within the West Africa sub region have come to challenge whether ECOWAS can remain an inclusive and adaptable institution facing diverse governance models and security priorities.

ECOWAS' founding principles were ambitious and forward-thinking. Its founding fathers such as Yakubu Gowon and Gnassingbe Eyadema envisioned a regional body to encourage economic growth through trade liberalization, ensure collective security via cooperative defence agreements, and promote political stability by supporting democratic norms. Over the decades, the organization has recorded notable successes, such as stabilizing Liberia and Sierra Leone during their civil wars, facilitating regional trade agreements, and serving as a platform for political dialogue.

Despite these achievements, the organization has struggled to address the growing complexity in the region. Economic disparities among member states, terrorism in the Sahel, and governance challenges have strained its resources and credibility. The recent withdrawal of three member states—Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso—signals the urgent need to revisit ECOWAS's foundational principles and evaluate their applicability in today's West African context.

Challenges to Inclusivity and Adaptability

One of the key issues facing ECOWAS is its ability to accommodate diverse governance models within its framework. The organization's emphasis on democratic governance has come in conflict with the realities of recent military coups in Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea. These countries—facing internal instability, terrorism, and economic hardships—have argued that ECOWAS's approach is not only rigid but also disconnected from their immediate needs.

The imposition of sanctions and political isolation has been a favoured tool of ECOWAS against states deemed to contravene its democratic norms. While these measures aim to uphold the principles of democratic governance, they often worsen economic suffering and alienate affected populations, as seen in Niger following its coup. This raises questions about whether sanctions are the most effective response or whether alternative mechanisms could better balance regional solidarity and national sovereignty.



The Sahel region's unique security challenges further expose ECOWAS's limitations. Terrorism, insurgency, and cross-border criminal activities have overwhelmed traditional security frameworks. Member states like Mali and Burkina Faso have sought alternative security partnerships, notably with Russia's Wagner Group, a signal of general dissatisfaction with ECOWAS's collective security mechanisms.

The Governments of Mali and Burkina Faso have expressed frustration at the perceived inability of the French Security Forces to curb the surge of violent extremism. In August 2014, France launched Operation Bakhane as a counterterrorism intervention, which encompassed former French colonies of Mali, Chad, Burkina Faso, Niger and Mauritania. Still, Operation Bakhane resulted in an unfortunate decade long occupation of the region.¹

Herein lies the justification of the Military Juntas of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger for the coups and subsequent alliance with the Russian PMC, Wagner Group. Contextualized in this manner, the perceived rigidity of ECOWAS and its member states towards their embattled brothers signals an absence of inclusivity and an inability to adapt to current circumstances. This raises the question: was ECOWAS created for the member states, or were the member states created for ECOWAS?

¹<https://www.counterextremism.com/wagner-group-sahel>



The Implications of Proposed Exits

The departure of Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso marks a turning point for ECOWAS. It is not merely a loss of membership but a symbolic rejection of the organization's ability to address its member states' political, economic, and security realities. This raises critical questions about the inclusivity and adaptability of ECOWAS's framework:

Critics argue that ECOWAS is increasingly seen as an instrument of external influence, particularly by France and Western allies. This perception undermines its legitimacy among member states that seek greater autonomy. If the three countries succeed in leaving, it sets a precedent for disengagement. These states' withdrawal could embolden other dissatisfied members to follow suit, weakening the organization's regional clout.

The exit will cause an erosion of collective security. The absence of key Sahelian states diminishes ECOWAS's capacity to address transnational threats like terrorism, which require coordinated responses.

Is it necessary to rethink ECOWAS's Mandate?

To remain relevant, ECOWAS may need to undergo structural and philosophical reforms that reflect the evolving realities of West Africa. Here are key areas for consideration:

Structural Reform

- » **Accommodating Diverse Governance Models:** ECOWAS needs to create a framework that respects its member states' sovereignty and unique political trajectories while upholding core principles of stability and cooperation. A dual-tier system that allows transitional governments to participate in decision-making without fully meeting democratic standards could be explored.

- » **Decentralized Governance:** Empowering subregional blocs within ECOWAS to address specific challenges—such as a Sahel-focused body for security issues—could enhance its adaptability and effectiveness.

Economic Pragmatism

- » **Alternative Sanctions:** ECOWAS could consider incentive-based approaches to encourage compliance with its principles instead of punitive sanctions that disproportionately harm vulnerable populations. These could include financial aid packages linked to measurable governance reforms.
- » **Reducing Dependency on External Powers:** Strengthening intra-regional trade and investment can reduce reliance on external actors, fostering greater economic independence and resilience.

Enhancing Security Cooperation

- » **Localized Security Solutions:** ECOWAS should prioritize capacity-building for national and regional security forces, focusing on counter-terrorism, border control, and intelligence-sharing.
- » **Collaborative Partnerships:** Engaging non-member states and global institutions in cooperative security initiatives can complement ECOWAS's efforts, particularly in the Sahel.

Maintaining Regional Solidarity

ECOWAS must rebuild trust among its members by positioning itself as a unifying force rather than an enforcer. This requires:

- » **Conflict Mediation:** Strengthening its role as a neutral mediator in disputes rather than taking punitive measures that alienate member states.
- » **Respecting Sovereignty:** Acknowledging its members' diverse political and security contexts while finding common ground for cooperation.
- » **Engaging Civil Society:** Involving citizens and grassroots organizations in dialogue and decision-making can enhance the legitimacy and inclusiveness of ECOWAS's initiatives.

Broader Global Context

The challenges facing ECOWAS do not occur in isolation. External powers like Russia and China capitalise on the organization's perceived weaknesses to expand their influence in West Africa.

Meanwhile, regional alternatives such as the Sahel Alliance could emerge as competitors if ECOWAS fails to adapt. These dynamics show the urgency of reform to ensure that ECOWAS remains the primary platform for regional cooperation.

In conclusion, the recent exits of Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso provide an opportunity for ECOWAS to reflect on its mandate and reimagine its role in West Africa. ECOWAS can reaffirm its relevance in a rapidly changing geopolitical landscape by embracing inclusivity, adaptability, and pragmatism. A reformed ECOWAS that respects diverse political ideologies and prioritizes localized solutions and economic and security resilience will be better equipped to navigate the complexities of the 21st century while maintaining regional solidarity.

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2. Issues in the News:

Top four stories on our thematic areas in Nigeria

Health: Chidoka Foundation advocates for increased cancer care funding at National Assembly

The Nneka Chidoka Outreach Program (NCOP), led by its founder, Chief Osita Chidoka, has called on lawmakers to prioritize increased funding for cancer care in Nigeria's 2025 budget. During a visit on Friday, January 17, to the Senate Committee on Health, chaired by Senator Ipalibo Harry Banigo, and the House of Representatives Committee on Special Healthcare, NCOP presented a robust advocacy plan to tackle Nigeria's cancer crisis during the committees' budget defence.

For more: <https://dailyblastng.com/chidoka-foundation-advocates-for-increased-cancer-care-funding-at-national-assembly/>



Security: NIS Raises Alarm Over Emergence Of New Sect 'ACHAD' In Kaduna

According to the NIS, the new sect which is reportedly linked to human trafficking and child separation, has its headquarters in Kaduna State, while its leader simply identified as Yokana, lives in Jos, Plateau State. In a circular dated January 14th, 2025, issued by the Principal Staff Officer to the Comptroller General of NIS, AA Aridegbe, alerted all state commands, directorates, zones and training institutions about the activities of the new sect.

For More: <https://www.channelstv.com/2025/01/19/nis-raises-alarm-over-emergence-of-new-sect-achad-in-kaduna/>



Transport: IGP Mourns Niger Explosion Victims, Urges Adherence To Road Safety Protocols

A statement signed by the Force Public Relations Officer, Olumuyiwa Adejobi, said the IGP, while emphasizing the importance of strict adherence to safety protocols on our roads, warned firmly against the negligence and disregard for regulations that can lead to such catastrophic incidents. The statement added that the IGP has directed all State Commissioners of Police to strengthen their Motor Traffic Divisions (MTDs) of their respective State Commands, in collaboration with other traffic management agencies to ensure strict compliance and enforcement of established protocols and traffic regulations on highways.

For more: <https://www.channelstv.com/2025/01/19/igp-mourns-niger-explosion-victims-urges-adherence-to-road-safety-protocols/>

Health: MWAN urges improved healthcare, expanded cancer control for women

The Medical Women's Association of Nigeria has called for urgent improvements in healthcare infrastructure and the equitable distribution of human resources across the country to address critical health issues affecting women. The association made this call during its 5th National Executive Council Meeting and Scientific Conference, held over three days in Jos, Plateau State. In a communiqué issued at the end of the conference on Sunday, MWAN highlighted the increasing burden of breast and cervical cancer among women in Nigeria, advocating for timely diagnosis, equitable access to treatment, and expanded HPV vaccination programmes. The communiqué was signed by the National President, Prof. Rosemary Ogu, and the National Coordinator Secretary, Dr. Vetty Agala.

For more: <https://punchng.com/mwan-urges-improved-healthcare-expanded-cancer-control-for-women/>



3. Regional Updates

Top stories from Benin, Cameroon, Chad, and Niger (BCCN)...

Chad foils attempt to destabilise country – minister

Chad's government has said security forces had thwarted an alleged effort to destabilise the country on Wednesday night, after a group of people attacked the presidential palace in the capital, N'Djamena. "An attempt at destabilisation has been foiled.



Nineteen people died and six were injured, including 18 assailants and one soldier," Foreign Minister Abderaman Koulamallah told state TV. He added that 24 individuals armed with knives, rather than guns, had attacked the guards around the presidential palace. Calm has now returned to N'Djamena.

Cameroon officials say country's military seized weapons from terrorists re-arming Boko Haram

Cameroon's military says it has seized several hundred weapons and combat uniforms that were being smuggled to a hideout of the Nigeria-based terrorist group Boko Haram. Officials say troops have been deployed in a bid to capture more weapons and



prevent Boko Haram from re-arming itself.

Beninese army suffers 'hard blow' in border attack

Benin forces have suffered heavy losses in an attack near the border with insurgency-hit Niger and Burkina Faso, authorities have said. Colonel Faizou Gomina, the National Guard's chief of staff, said one of Benin's most well-equipped military positions had been hit in the north on Wednesday evening. "We've been dealt a very hard blow," Col Gomina added. Abderaman Koulamallah told state TV. He added that 24 individuals armed with knives, rather than guns, had attacked the guards around the presidential palace. Calm has now returned to N'Djamena.

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